Abruzzo at War: A Villager's Account

By Michael Brophy
Originally published May 1991. Revised May 2026.

The German War Machine Reaches Southern Italy

The German War effort, although having begun in Northern Europe by 1939, had not reached the central and southern portions of Italy until 1944. Nazi Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring commanded the Axis troops in the Italian theater. The Axis troop mass in theater was a conglomeration of Fascist Italians and Nazis. By 1944, Kesselring's divisions — 26 in all — held defensive positions stretching from Gaeta, on the Tyrrhenian coast, roughly 150 km (92 miles) across to Pescara, on the Adriatic coast.

Elena DeLutiis Pronio (1907–1995)

It was during this time that Elena DeLutiis Pronio was living in the small mountain village of Miglianico, in the Abruzzo Region of Italy. Less than 80 km (50 miles) away in Pescara, the Nazi "steamroller" was pushing south in attempts to crush the invading Allied forces led by British Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander. These Allied forces, consisting mainly of the American II and VI Corps and the vast British 8th Army, began moving north from Sicily, up the length of the Italian boot towards their primary objective — Rome. The British and their combined Canadian and Polish forces took the land route north while the Americans sailed straight from Sicily to stage amphibious landings at Gaeta and Anzio. During this period when the Allies were chipping away at the German front line, Elena and her family were witnesses to the trials and tragedies of war.

Miglianico today, in the Abruzzo region.

As the German forces crept nearer to Miglianico, Elena remembered one night in particular when a man knocked at her door. Terrified of the impending invasion by the Nazis, she was hesitant to open the door. The entire family — her mother, father, two brothers, two sisters, and uncle — were living in her home. Furthermore, her uncle's wife and two children were living there also. Naturally, Elena was not going to open the door, but the man identified himself as a German officer and demanded that she let him in. Upon entering, the officer noticed Elena's thirteen-year-old daughter Maria. He could sense her fear and reassured Elena that he meant no harm. He told her that Maria reminded him of his own small daughter. The officer warned Elena that she must evacuate the house immediately, for the German troops were going to take the town by morning. She insisted that the family would be safe staying in the house. However, the German soldier fervently persuaded her to leave, telling her that the Germans would destroy anything that was of no use to them, including her home.

The German defensive lines across Italy, 1943–1945. The Gothic Line stretched from Massa on the Tyrrhenian coast to Pesaro on the Adriatic. Miglianico (starred) sat just south of the line, in the Abruzzo region.

Soon thereafter, Elena and her family left all of their belongings except for one change of clothes and a few valuable pieces of jewelry, which they sewed into the hem of Maria's overcoat. Maria recalled clearly how the members of her family constantly reminded her never to take off that coat, for their only means of purchasing food was with those few items of jewelry. After leaving the house, the family found a grotto in the hillside nearby in which to settle down. There were other individuals who took refuge in these caves also. It was here, in the caves, that Elena and her family saw the worst of the war.

Her daughter Maria remembered, "God must have wanted us [to live], because we had so many opportunities to die." Indeed they did. Soon after the Nazis occupied Miglianico, Elena watched from the grotto as her house was destroyed by dynamite charges planted by the invading force. Everything she had built over a lifetime was reduced to a pile of cinders.

Now, all the family had to look forward to was survival in the cave, which was by no means easy. People were filthy since they could not bathe for months at a time and had only one change of clothing. Getting water was not a problem during the warm months, but in wintertime the mountain springs froze over making it difficult to obtain. Additionally, food was scarce and whatever they happened to find — potatoes, wheat, etc. — was placed in a wooden casket and buried outside the cave. This was done because German soldiers made periodic searches of the grottos and looted whatever was available. One day Elena left the dwelling in search of food. While she was away, the Nazis entered and rounded up a group of young boys, one of whom was Silvio, her son. Later on she arrived back at the cave with two loaves of bread

(from where she obtained them no one knew). However, a few German soldiers remained behind and saw that she had food. Immediately they ordered her to turn the bread over to them. The soldiers then left, but Elena became hysterical when she discovered they had taken her son also. She was in suspense for hours, when finally Silvio reappeared at the cave, obviously having been set free by the Germans.

Elena also recalls one evening when she and her daughter climbed up the hill back to the ruins of their home. They had gone to look for any remaining food in the rubble. After heading back empty-handed, Elena and Maria were unable to cross an adjoining road since a convoy of German trucks was approaching. The two crouched quietly as the line of trucks passed. A pair of rear doors on one of the trucks swung open suddenly and a pile of dead bodies tumbled out. Immediately, the convoy halted and a group of German soldiers hurried to lift the bodies back into the truck. The convoy carried nothing more than German

Allied troops in Ortona, December 1943. The eight-day battle for this Adriatic port — less than 16 km (10 miles) from Miglianico — became known as the "Italian Stalingrad" for the brutality of its house-to-house combat between Canadian infantry and German paratroopers. Elena and her family were huddled in their grotto when the artillery began, close enough to hear.

casualties, to Elena's relief, but the experience of seeing the mutilated corpses of countless men haunted Maria that night.

The hardest day came when Elena and Maria were forced to stand in an execution line. One afternoon, after discovering the body of a fellow soldier, a band of Nazi officers marched 36 Italian villagers, including Elena and Maria, to the top of the mountain on which Miglianico sat. One of these officers demanded that the person who killed the soldier identify himself. None of the 36 individuals admitted to the killing and many denied having committed such an act. In a manner not unfamiliar to the Nazis, the officer began executing, by shot to the head, every other person in line. Maria was at the opposite end of the line from her mother and screamed in fear. Suddenly, another German officer ran up and ordered the first officer to cease the executions. He informed him that the murderers had been found. It was learned that four brothers had collaborated in the murder. As punishment, the Nazi officers made the parents of the four brothers watch their execution. Furthermore, the mother and father were forced to bury their sons in front of a crowd of villagers, and the Germans warned that anyone attempting to assist in the burial would be shot also.

Elena's family was not the only one trying to escape the Nazi-Fascist forces tightening their grip on Italy. On 9 September 1943, the day after the armistice with the Allies was announced, King Vittorio Emanuele III, Queen Elena, Crown Prince Umberto, and Prime Minister Pietro Badoglio fled Rome to avoid capture by the advancing Germans. Their convoy crossed the Apennines and arrived in Abruzzo, where the King spent the night at the Castello Ducale di Crecchio, in the Province of Chieti — fewer than 10 km (6 miles) from Miglianico. The next morning, the royal party continued to the port of Ortona and boarded the corvette Baionetta, which carried them down the Adriatic coast to Brindisi. Brindisi became the temporary capital of what was called the "Kingdom of the South," the rump Italian state still aligned with the Allies. For Elena and her neighbors, who watched the royal convoy pass through the region that evening, seeing the King abandon Rome was a turning point — the country's rightful leader was running for the coast, and what came next was the German Army filling the vacuum he left behind.

As the latter part of 1944 approached, the conflict escalated and saw the deterioration of the Axis foothold across central Italy, which later came

to be called the "Gothic line". Even though outnumbered by seven divisions, the Allied air power advantage could not be matched. In contrast to the 170 aircraft, many of which were obsolete by 1944, the Allies, more precisely the Americans, possessed roughly two dozen Tactical Air Force squadrons. These air groups employed the massive power and strike capabilities which only the B-17 "Flying Fortress" and B-24 "Liberator" bombers could deliver.

Elena and her family remembered the period during which the American bombers littered the entire countryside with up to 320 kg (700 lb) bombs. Elena's daughter Maria recalled 8 December 1944 as "the heaviest [US] bombardment" she had ever seen. Nearly 1,000 American planes carpet bombed the area surrounding Chieti and Pescara.

According to Maria, "You could hear the planes coming." Sorties were staged at numerous points during the daylight hours, and at night American troops that had parachuted behind the German front line used flamethrowers to eliminate the Axis troops hiding in the woods. That particular day, however, Elena and her family took refuge from the bombing inside the grotto. Suddenly, there was an explosion directly outside the entrance to the cave and the rock ceiling collapsed. Everyone inside was temporarily blinded by the smoke, and suffocation was a near reality. Fortunately, none of the avalanche killed anyone and they were able to crawl out an opening in the rubble. The heat from the blast singed everyone's skin. Maria remembered how extremely dry her skin was. Just by wiping one's face, an entire layer of skin came off.

Furthermore, she recounted, "Our lips were nothing but blood". Both Elena and Maria explained, "We hated the Americans for the longest time, because they just bombed the hell out of us".

During this time, nearby Chieti was declared an "open city" by Axis officials. Elena and her family, like many others from the surrounding mountainside, sought the safety of the city, which, they were reassured, would not be bombed by either Axis or Allied forces. This "open city", however, was a "laugh." Upon arriving in Chieti, the family was assigned by the Germans to reside on the second floor of an abandoned building which had been converted into a refugee shelter. Not even a week after moving in, Elena and her family were forced to flee. One late evening, a group of Nazis came to gather the refugees for transport to concentration camps in northern Italy. Everyone except for her father and uncle were able to escape by jumping out the second story window. Elena's father was too old and weak to make such a jump. Therefore, her uncle agreed to stay behind with him. The others fled to the adjoining village of Cheradin, where Elena worked as a housekeeper to earn food for the family. Elena's father and uncle were not seen again until 1945.

Liberation of Italy After the Nazi Terror

By 1945, the Allied forces had control of what was formerly the "Gothic line". After ousting the Axis from Rome on 31 May, the American 88th Division entered the Eternal City four days later and declared it liberated. Only ten days later, the entire Nazi defense, stretching from Rome to Pescara, was eliminated.

Elena recalled the American troops marching through Cheradin, where she and the family had fled after near capture. The Americans arrived mostly by foot, followed by supply trucks. Additionally, Maria remembered seeing Indian soldiers with turbans alongside the Americans. The villagers cheered on the liberating force, and flowers and kisses were given to the troops. According to Maria, "Liberation Day was a very happy day."

That same day, Elena and her brother returned to Miglianico to see what was left of their hometown. There were homeless people everywhere, but fortunately the American Red Cross and the US Army had set up emergency stations where food, water, and clothing were being handed out. On 15 June, Elena and her brother travelled back to Cheradin to gather the family and

bring them home. Upon the family's arrival back in Miglianico, Maria remembered the Red Cross tents and the food they were given. Among the rations distributed were powdered eggs and milk, candy, cigarettes, and flour. She said "...the food was terrible, but when you're starving it's delicious." All the villagers were also given vaccinations against malaria and cholera.

The entire rebuilding process took time. The entire town was littered with leftover German landmines. The American occupational force set very strict rules concerning the farming of land. Each section of land was thoroughly searched for mines before anyone was allowed to till the soil.

Another major problem was the rebuilding of homes. The rubble of many houses had been left sitting for over a year, thus causing the rat population to increase many-fold. Elena explained that there was always someone on watch as the others slept, because the rats were known to have bitten off people's fingers.

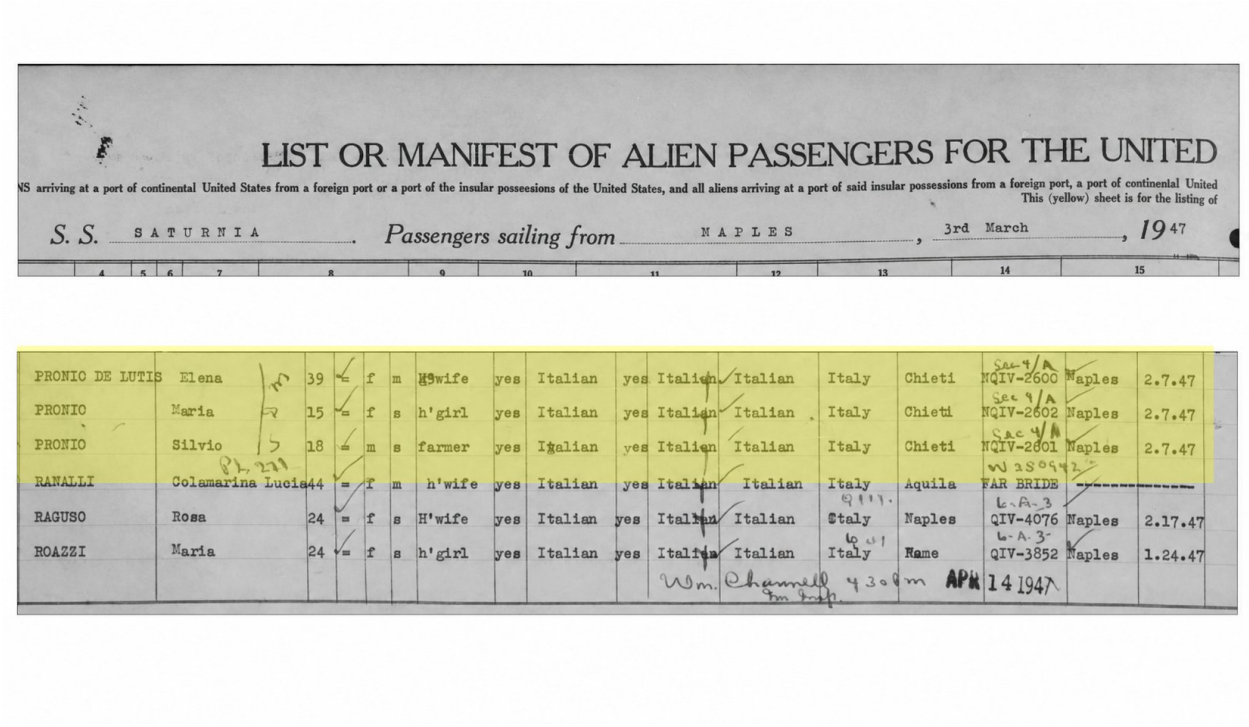
Maria added, "The rats were bigger than...cats."

Nevertheless, everyone worked as best they could to rebuild what they once had. Elena, with the help of her family, rebuilt her house room by room, while in the meantime living out of a tent.

Not long after the reconstruction of the town began, Elena learned of her father's and uncle's whereabouts. One afternoon, a man in a car approached her and explained that her father and uncle were on their way home. The man went on to say that he spotted them while he was up north. Elena learned later that the two were put to work planting rice at a German concentration camp near Venice. To the family's relief, soon after that encounter Elena's father and uncle returned to Miglianico. Her father's physical condition had deteriorated badly. One afternoon, he unknowingly sat on top of an unexploded American bomb in their back yard. Like mines, unexploded bombs were scattered throughout the countryside. Both Elena and her daughter remembered seeing him perched there. They screamed for him to get up, but he could not hear them — his hearing was nearly gone, and his eyesight had failed enough that he did not know what he was sitting on. The family called for nearby American troops to help him. A group of soldiers arrived, led him to safety, then defused the explosive. Elena's father lived in Miglianico only a few short months before he died of natural causes.

Two years passed and the American presence in Miglianico was still large. During the early spring of 1947, Elena and her two children, Maria and Silvio, prepared to emigrate to the United States, where they would meet up with her husband Verino. He had been in the U.S. since the 1930s working as a construction foreman in the Washington, D.C. area. Elena, Maria, and Silvio made a series of three visits to Naples for physical examinations, inoculations, and to complete the paperwork required for the passage to America. Finally, on 1 April, the three family members said their farewells and left Miglianico. After arriving in Naples the next day, they soon departed on the Italian registered ship for the journey across the Atlantic. Twelve days later, on 14 April 1947, the Pronios arrived in New York Harbor and were once again able to look forward to a life of promise.

This account is drawn from firsthand oral recollections by Elena DeLutiis Pronio, the author's maternal grandmother, along with her daughter Maria Pronio Benedetti and her sister Generosa DeLutiis Pronio.



LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED

NS arriving at a port of continental United States from a foreign port or a port of the insular posseesions of the United States, and all aliens arriving at a port of said insular possessions from a foreign port, a port of continental United
This (yellow) sheet is for the listing of

S. S. SATURNIA . Passengers sailing from MAPLES , 3rd March , 1947

PRONIC DE LUTIS	Elena	39	=	f	m	H'wife	yes	Italian	yes	Italian	Italian	Italy	Chieti	NQIV-2600	Naples	2.7.47
PRONIC	Maria	15	=	f	s	h'girl	yes	Italian	yes	Italian	Italian	Italy	Chieti	NQIV-2602	Naples	2.7.47
PRONIC	Silvio	18	=	m	s	farmer	yes	Italian	yes	Italian	Italian	Italy	Chieti	NQIV-2601	Naples	2.7.47
RANALLI	Colamarina Lucia	44	=	f	m	h'wife	yes	Italian	yes	Italian	Italian	Italy	Aquila	FAR BRIDE		
RAGUSO	Rosa	24	=	f	s	H'wife	yes	Italian	yes	Italian	Italian	Italy	Naples	QIV-4076	Naples	2.17.47
ROAZZI	Maria	24	=	f	s	h'girl	yes	Italian	yes	Italian	Italian	Italy	Rome	QIV-3852	Naples	1.24.47

Wm. Channell 430pm APR 14 1947

U.S. immigration manifest for the S.S. Saturnia, 1947. Elena (recorded as "Pronio De Lutis," age 39, housewife), her daughter Maria (15), and her son Silvio (18) appear in the highlighted rows, all listed as Italian nationals from Chieti province. The family arrived at New York Harbor on 14 April 1947.